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# The relationships formed by elderly people: reflecting cultural changes in Europe

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Social and cultural changes that have taken place since the 1960s have had a major impact, in particular on the lives of young adults, but they have also affected the living conditions and opportunities of older adults. The presentation of a selection of relevant data about elderly people's demographic position in different countries of Europe is central in the second section. In the final section results of a Dutch survey are provided and information about new flexible forms of living arrangements when starting a new partner relationship after the age of fifty, are presented and discussed

A large number of European countries have a history of close ties, having been linked economically through trade relationships and some by treaties giving bilateral support in times of conflict and war, and they also share many cultural affinities. As a result, most countries in Europe have more or less common, shared norms and values. Nevertheless, each region has had its own history of changing behavioural patterns and attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Country-based differences in the rate of mortality decline and in accepting new fertility patterns form the core of the First Demographic Transition.

Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa<sup>2</sup> introduced the concept of a Second Demographic Transition, concerning country and regional differences in new demographic patterns in family formation and fertility, which started around 1965 in Europe.

This concept is that older behavioural patterns, norms and attitudes concerning fertility, and union formation and dissolution are being replaced by new ones, associated with (1) socio-structural changes, (2) cultural changes, and (3) technological innovations.<sup>3–8</sup>

In discussing this Second Demographic Transition, emphasis is usually placed on young people. Apparently, demographers seem to believe that socio-economic and cultural changes affect only the younger generations. The validity of this assumption is the main objective of this article.

In first section we will provide a brief overview of the central elements of the Second Demographic Transition. Data relevant to elderly people's demographic position in different regions of Europe will be central in the second section, particularly about re-partnering of elderly divorced or widowed people after the age of 50.

Since the concept of the Second Demographic Transition was introduced by Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa in 1986, it has been refined and elaborated.<sup>3-8</sup> It is agreed that socio-structural changes that have taken place since the 1960s have had a major impact on the lives of young adults, but they have also affected the living conditions and opportunities of older adults. The most important factors include an increase in wealth, in social security programmes, and in health provisions. During this period, educational advancement has improved substantially and more young adults than ever before are continuing full-time education up to high-school and university levels. The enrolment of female students in education has reached a level that was felt to be unrealistic only a few decades ago. These changes have contributed to the increase in the labour force participation of young women and mothers, and in an important change in the relationships between men and women, particularly in the position of women in society. Whilst the extended period of time spent in education postpones the start of labour force participation by one or more years, it indirectly increases participation now that more and more young women want to be active in work for longer periods of time, including (part-time) employment following childbirth. This has also affected patterns of union formation and fertility. In some countries, combining motherhood and employment is difficult due to shortages in day-care facilities and an unequal division of responsibilities between husbands and wives. The expectation that they will be confronted with these obstacles is the reason why women, especially the better educated, prefer to postpone the forming of stable relationships, marriage and the birth of a first child. At the end of the 20th century the mean mother's age at first birth had risen to 29 years in the Netherlands, Switzerland and other countries. Government policies across Europe are aimed at enabling women to combine employment and childcare; if successful, this will increase female labour force participation, both full- and part-time.

Cultural changes that have taken place in Europe since the 1960s have influenced the system of norms and values cherished by young and older adults. There has been a decline in control of the behaviour of young adults, the authority of parents, the church and other bodies is allowing them much greater freedom to follow their own inclinations than in the past. Standard patterns for life events

– leaving the parental home to marry, followed by childbirth, the mother withdrawing from the labour force to take care of children and the home, being married until the death of one of the partners and continuing life as a widow or widower, living alone or co-residing with one of the children – have been replaced by self-chosen variations. This trend was set in the 1960s, and still persists. The changes may include leaving the parental home to start living independently, followed by unmarried cohabitation, at the end of the unmarried cohabitation returning to the parental home, leaving the parental home for the second time, unmarried cohabitation, marriage, etc.

This preference for personal decision making concerning one's life and lifestyle applies to both young and old. Among older people, living alone after widowhood or divorce is typically an indicator of an individualistic lifestyle, in contrast to co-residence, which is connected to lifestyles and countries that favour traditional patterns of family life.

The most influential technological innovation that triggered the Second Demographic Transition is the introduction and widespread distribution of reliable contraceptives. Their general availability has enabled couples and individuals to regulate the number, timing and spacing of their children. TV and radio have further enhanced the acceptance of new lifestyles and informed people about new ways of life. Young adults, in particular, have been affected by these developments, in that they have re-evaluated union formation and marriage and postponed decisions in life that result in non-reversible outcomes, such as childbearing.

Older adults have re-evaluated the possibilities of being independent and living their own lives for as long as possible. Today's older adults, whilst wanting to have a good relationship with their children, also have a strong desire to live independently for as long as they can. This is so also after widowhood or divorce in later life.

Europe has been a leader in accepting profound cultural changes, such as secularization and individualization; however, the rate of acceptance with which new behavioural patterns and attitudes are accepted differs among the regions and countries of Europe. Van de Kaa<sup>7</sup> differentiated between a leading first group of the northern European, followed by the western European countries, a second group (always characterized by a time lag) were countries in southern Europe, and later the eastern European cluster.

Mellens<sup>9,11</sup> and Pinelli<sup>10</sup> have used multivariate analysis to characterize regional variations within Europe. These have shown that the rate of change is directly related to the economic prosperity of a country and is strongly correlated with indicators, such as the participation of women in the labour force and other gender-related aspects of life.

In considering this, one cannot but be struck by regional differences, in which

new behavioural patterns of young adults coincide with the new behavioural patterns of older adults. Starting in the 1960s, there was a sharp increase in the incidence of marital dissolution among women aged 60 to 64 years, but there are large differences between European regions, which became accentuated in the next decades (Figure 1). These differences are strongly correlated with the importance of religion in people's lives (Figure 2).

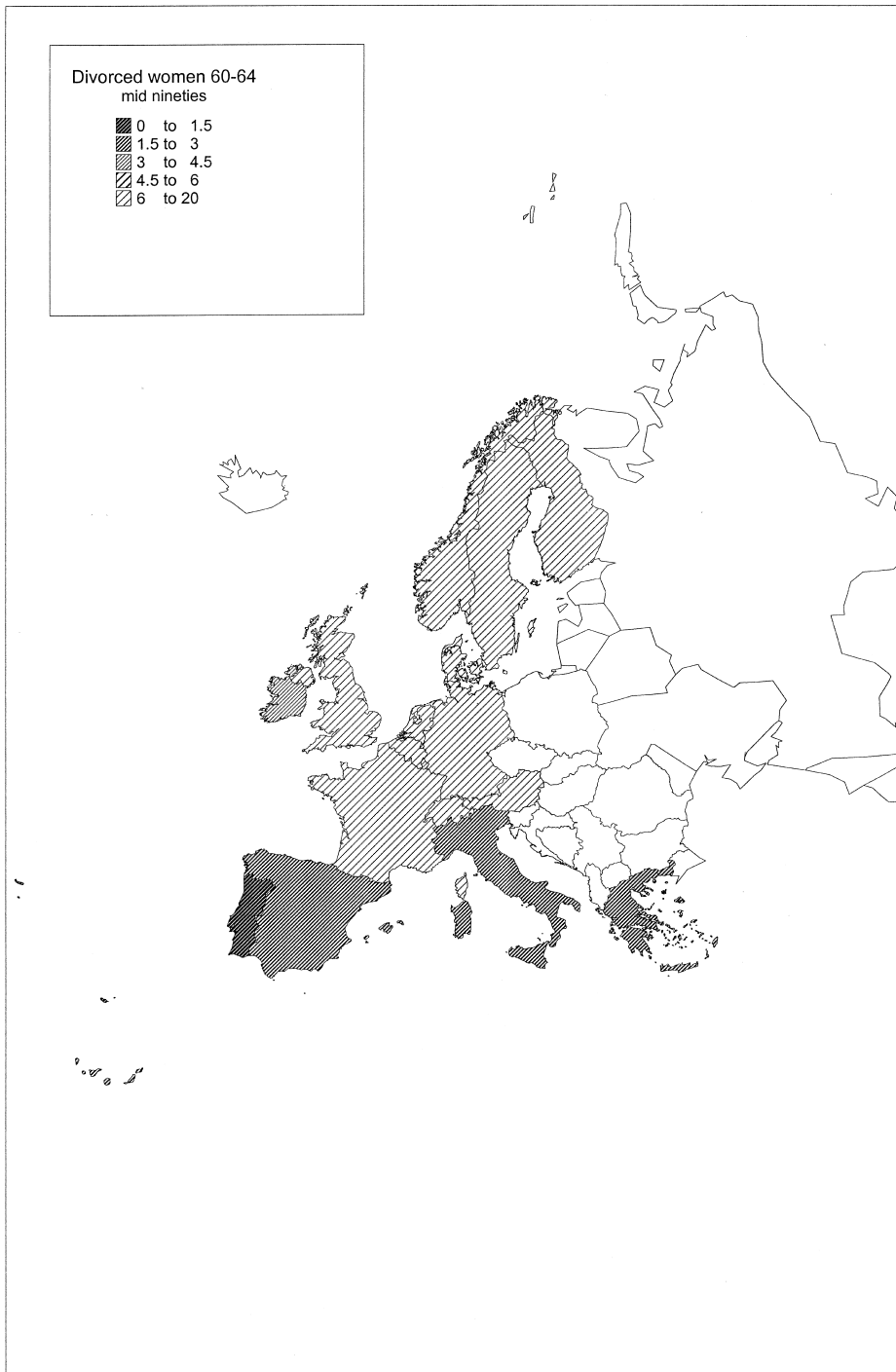
Life expectancy is increasing all over the world, with the highest levels in the European region, Japan, the US and Canada. Naturally, the increase in life expectancy goes hand in hand with an increase in the number and percentages of persons in older age. According to Myers<sup>12</sup> the increase in life expectancy results, for those still in a first marriage, in a longer duration of this partner bond via 'ageing together'. However, for those individuals who are confronted with a break-up of their partner relationship (either by divorce or by widowhood), it includes the possibility of longer and very long periods of absence of a partner relationship.

In later life there are, at present, three model living arrangements after the dissolution of marriage: co-residence with adult children, living alone and institutional arrangements,<sup>13-26</sup> but new, more creative, solutions are being found by older persons to meet their needs for companionship, solidarity and reciprocal support after widowhood or divorce at older ages.<sup>27</sup>

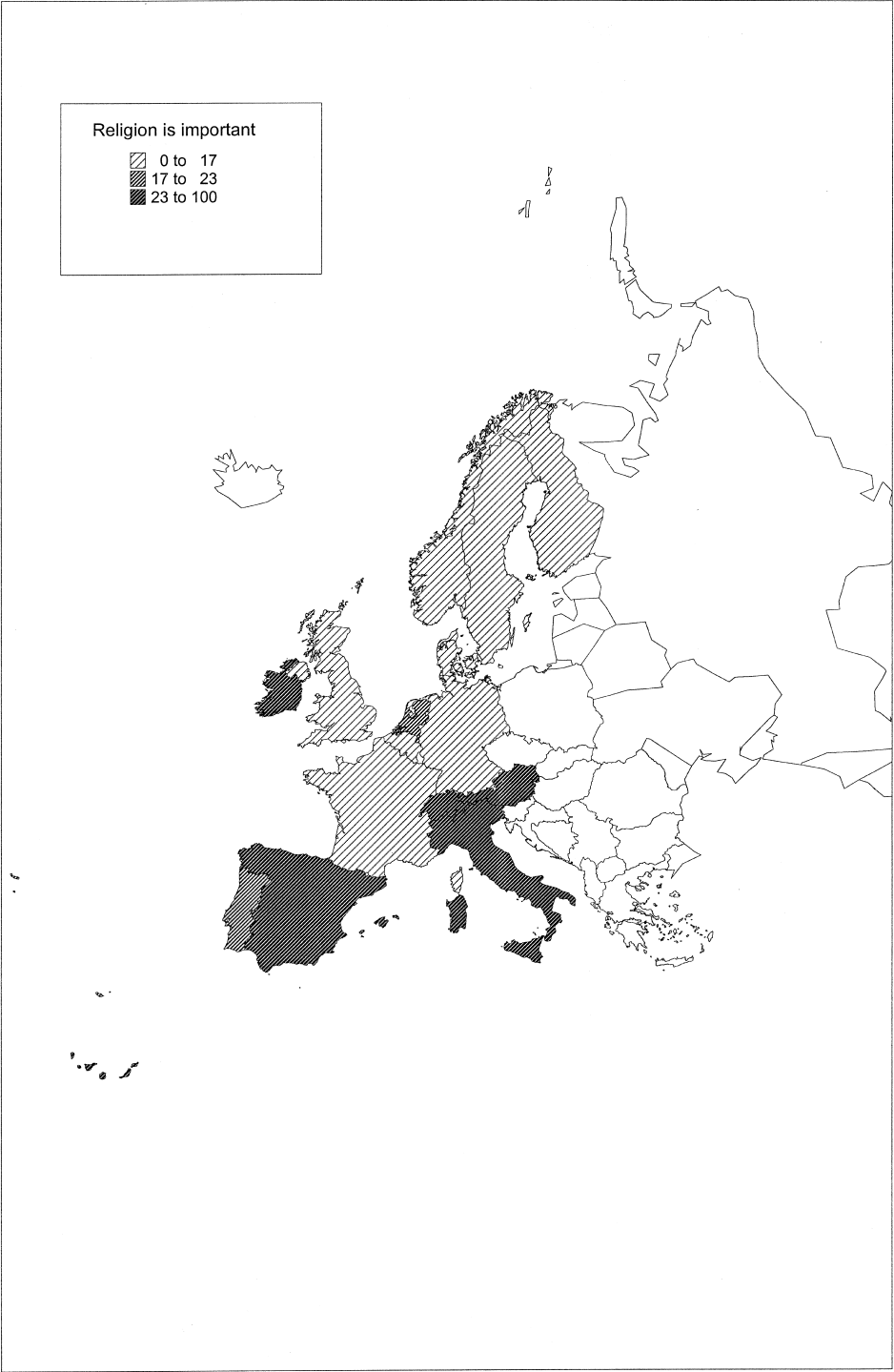
In meeting a potential new partner, the older widowed or divorced woman or man has carefully to weigh the pros and cons of the new possible arrangement. Burch and Matthews<sup>28</sup> suggest that, in choosing a particular household status, an individual or a couple are, in effect, choosing some combination of a set of component goods, such as privacy, companionship, domestic services, and consumption economies of scale. Sharing a household may provide people with personal care, reciprocal attention and support, solidarity, division of household tasks and other positive goods. Possible negative outcomes include an inequality if one of the partners invests less time, money and effort in the cooperative undertaking than the other, than was foreseen when the arrangement was set up.<sup>29</sup> The new partner relationship offers all the possibilities of companionship, sharing both good and bad times, and alleviating the risk of loneliness (especially during the weekends), but it also restricts independent decisions about one's daily life.

Some widowed and divorced women and men who do not remarry may enter into a flexible type of living arrangement with a new partner, giving a better guarantee of continuing independence. The outcomes depend to a certain extent on the possibilities and restrictions one is confronted with. Older adults are not living in a social vacuum, but are affected also by the cultural changes taking place in society, and by changing behavioural patterns in younger generations.

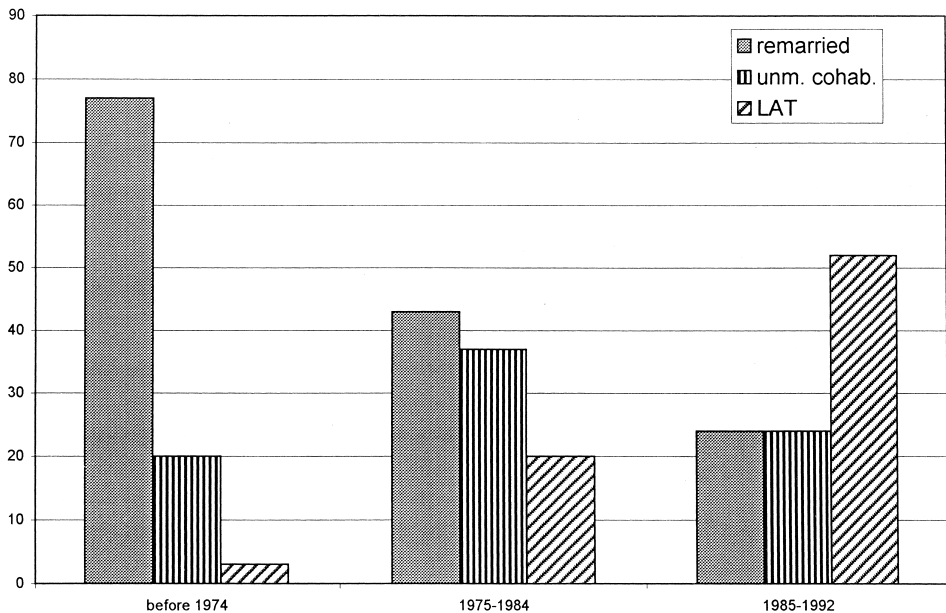
In 1992 we studied a group of 173 older Dutch people re-partnering after widowhood or divorce.<sup>30</sup> At the time of interviewing, 69 had remarried, 48 were



**Figure 1.** The percentages of divorced women aged 60–64 years, in percentages of the women in this age category, by country, for the mid 1990s.



**Figure 2.** The answer ‘Yes, religion is very important in life’, in percentages per country.



**Figure 3.** Remarriage, unmarried cohabitation and living apart and together after repartnering at ages 50 or over, by calendar year at start (Source: NESTOR-LSN, 1992;  $N = 173$ ).

in unmarried cohabitation and the others were involved in living apart and together relationships – that is, living in a single household and occasionally sharing living quarters with this partner. In Figure 3 we have presented the arrangements existing according to the time they were established. It can be seen that the pattern has changed, in that remarriage has become less common and casual relationship have replaced them. This is similar to the changes reported in other countries.

Persons who do not have a bond with a church are more likely to be in unmarried co-habitation. However, having been divorced increases the probability of remarriage, and widowhood increases the probability of starting an informal relationship.<sup>31</sup> Similar results have been reported for young adults.<sup>32</sup>

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